

THE WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT

POLICY BRIEF
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Promoting Student Success in Community Colleges by Increasing Support Services¹

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As the national economy evolves, a greater premium is placed on workers with postsecondary skills and credentials. Data consistently shows that education attainment translates into higher wages and annual earnings. States looking to increase the number of adults with postsecondary credentials must do more than just expand college enrollments. They must find ways to raise the percentage of students who complete their studies and obtain a certificate or degree.

Many studies indicate that America's higher education institutions, particularly community colleges, have significant room to improve their retention and completion rates. Research finds that approximately one-half of community college students fail to return after the first year and eventually fail to obtain a certificate or degree.⁴ Minority and first-generation American students fare even worse. According to a 2005 report published by the Community College Research Center, only 37 percent of black students and 42 percent of Hispanic students who enrolled in community college in 1995–96 completed either a bachelor or associate degree or certificate within six years. As *Measuring Up 2006* shows, state-by-state outcomes for community college students returning after the first year range from a low of 44 percent to a non-exemplary high of 65 percent.⁵

The Working Poor Families Project (WFPF) supports the efforts of state nonprofit organizations to strengthen state policies that can help low-income working families achieve economic success and security. The WFPF encourages state groups to focus on ways postsecondary educational systems, particularly community colleges, can help working adults gain the skills and education necessary to succeed in the labor market. One area deserving specific attention is improving student success and outcomes in postsecondary education.

There is little argument that low-income and other student populations (*e.g.*, first generation, adult workers, single parents, etc.) face substantial hurdles in successfully completing postsecondary educational programs. These hurdles often include both a lack understanding of the processes and culture of college life, as well as insufficient personal resources and supports (*e.g.*, income for living expenses, child care, transportation, etc.). The good news is that actions can be taken to address these circumstances and thus improve student success. The bad news is the current level of action, at both the institutional and state level, is woefully insufficient to address the need.

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Strengthening State Policies for
America's Working Poor

Millions of American breadwinners work hard to support their families. But, despite their determination and effort, many are mired in low-wage jobs that provide inadequate benefits and offer few opportunities for advancement. In fact, more than one out four American working families now earn wages so low that they have difficulty surviving financially.³

Launched in 2002 and currently supported by the Annie E. Casey, Ford, Joyce, and Mott foundations, the Working Poor Families Project is a national initiative that works to improve these economic conditions. The project partners with state nonprofit organizations and supports their policy efforts to better prepare America's working families for a more secure economic future.

For more information:
<http://www.workingpoorfamilies.org>

States have an important role to play in improving student retention and completion outcomes. State resources and policies can encourage and support institutional actions that help students successfully navigate the challenges of postsecondary education. As described below, states as diverse as California, Colorado, Illinois, Ohio, Texas and Washington are exploring ways to address this issue. Unfortunately, these states are a minority. All states, including those with the highest first year return rates (South Dakota and Wyoming at 65 percent according to *Measuring Up 2006*) can benefit from improvement, as even these states lose one-third of the students who were sufficiently motivated and qualified to attend community college in the first place. State economies cannot afford such losses.

INSTITUTIONAL ACTIONS TO IMPROVE STUDENT SUCCESS AND OUTCOMES

Experts offer a wide range of explanations for low retention and completion outcomes. One important factor is that student support activities, which are developed and administered by local institutions, are not sufficient to address student needs. Institutions currently give little priority to this and states do little to encourage them to do so. As a result, student retention and completion outcomes suffer. Almost across the board, colleges do not devote enough resources and attention to this area, despite evidence that suggests more and better educational support services improve rates of retention and completion.

Before considering how states can help facilitate improvement in educational support services, it is helpful to briefly review just what these services are.⁶ Perhaps the most important support services are those that help students successfully navigate **academic** challenges as they develop. Effective programs work with students to establish educational plans that are tailored to their career interests and provide special workshops and assistance to help them learn effective study habits and receive assistance with specific courses via tutoring, study groups, and so on. A second important group could be described as **personal guidance services**, which help students address personal issues that may impinge on their

academic performance through one-on-one, group and other forms of assistance. Finally, **supplemental supports and services** provide students access to resources that can help alleviate other family and personal needs such as work-study, child care and transportation, among many others.

Several other factors can increase student success including when, where and how classes are offered. An ever increasing percent of all community college students are part-time, working adults. Institutions need to respond to these demographics by designing classes that are accessible to students who juggle family and work with academics. Alternative instructional models, which provide students opportunities to learn in innovative formats that emphasize accelerated/compressed learning, non-regular hours, group/cohort learning (*e.g.* learning communities), distance learning, and creating curriculum contextualized to career interests, are important components that enhance student success. In addition, financial aid and access to work-study jobs can influence a student's ability to continue and complete his or her studies.⁷

Student services are delivered at the institutional level and some evaluative research suggests that these services can improve student success. A 2004 ACT report concluded that “non-academic factors of academic-related skills, academic self-confidence, academic goals, institutional commitment, social support, certain contextual influences (institutional selectivity and financial support), and social involvement all had a positive relationship to retention.”⁸ MDRC points to an evaluation of the national TRIO program—the federal program that supports approximately 1,000 higher education institutions nationwide to help low-income students access and succeed in higher education—which found that the campus-based Student Support Services program had positive outcomes: “Both student grade point averages and their year-to-year retention rates increased as they were exposed to services.”⁹ Unfortunately, as researcher Vincent Tinto notes, “Student Support Services programs serve only a fraction of the eligible college student population. It is estimated that at the current funding level, SSS serves only 7 percent of eligible students.”¹⁰

MDRC noted similar positive findings for two **California**-funded educational support service programs; students receiving assistance “had better academic outcomes—persistence, retention and degree completion—than full-time students not receiving assistance.”¹¹ Another review of student support services found “considerable research evidence that counseling has a significant positive effect on student retention and graduation.”¹²

Despite these positive findings, educational services and supports often are not a high-profile item and “may be particularly vulnerable to downsizing and elimination during times of budget constraints.”¹³ As Norton Grubb notes, such activities as guidance and counseling “have often been relatively peripheral to community colleges.”¹⁴ Thus, the key issue is how to encourage local postsecondary institutions to give priority to these issues.

STATE POLICIES TO ENHANCE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES AND SUCCESS

State policymakers can encourage and support community colleges to improve student retention and completion rates. Some would argue that completions should be the primary metric of institutional success and that states should routinely measure and report on student outcomes. This would then lead to greater attention to student support services and their contribution to better student outcomes.

State policymakers have four primary tools at their disposal to encourage and support local institutions expand and enhance student support services:

1. Focus attention on student success;
2. Provide targeted funding for student services and supports;
3. Use general institutional funding; and
4. Reward successful performance.

1) FOCUS ATTENTION

States can raise the visibility of student retention and completion issues by setting goals for improvement, requiring regular reports on student success, and requiring institutions to strengthen their educational service and support activities and practices. Through its “Closing the Gap” initiative, begun in

2000, **Texas** committed to increasing the number of students obtaining degrees and certificates by 50 percent over the following 15 years. The state also set goals for increasing the participation and success of black and Hispanic students. Although Texas has not provided additional funds to achieve these retention and completion goals, the state legislature has required institutions to develop and utilize a “Uniform Recruitment and Retention Strategy” to guide their efforts. The plan requires the development of special strategies for serving at-risk students that includes key student support services such as advising, tutoring and mentoring. Institutions will provide annual reports on how effective their retention strategies have been.

Colorado recently implemented a Performance Contract between the Department of Higher Education and the State Board for Community Colleges and Occupational Education. Among other things, the Contract calls for increases in student retention rates and sets numerical targets for first-year students in the community college system. In addition, the Contract gives specific attention to addressing the retention needs of underserved students (*e.g.*, low-income, racial and ethnic minorities) and calls for institutions to direct special services to these populations.¹⁵

2) PROVIDE TARGETED FUNDING

Some states use categorical programs to address particular institutional needs. **California** has enacted specific programs to support and encourage student support services. Although the state expects institutions to use their general formula funding to finance student supports, California also targets general funds to finance dedicated student service programs. The Extended Opportunity Program and Services (EOPS) program provides funding for institutions to assist low-income and educationally disadvantaged students through academic and personal counseling, tutoring, and grants and services for textbooks and other supportive services. The Cooperative Agencies Resources for Education (CARE) program supplements EOPS by targeting students on public assistance with children and providing them with child care, transportation and other services. Together, funding for these two

programs will total \$112.9 million in FY 2006–2007. In addition, California allocates approximately \$465 million (including EOPS and CARE) annually to cover all student service needs.

California and other states have also tapped additional sources of state funds to address students' academic and personal needs. In 2005, the state allocated approximately \$34 million in general revenue funds (down considerably from previous years) to the community colleges California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) program to better serve TANF participants. The colleges use these resources for both academic and personal supports, as well as for redesigning instructional programs to better accommodate non-traditional students. For FY 2006–2007, California increased the CalWORKs budget to nearly \$44 million to support additional work-study opportunities.

Similarly, **Kentucky** uses \$4.4 million annually in state TANF resources to finance its Ready-To-Work and Work and Learn programs, which provide participants in community/technical colleges and participants in adult education programs with guidance, mentoring and supports to help them succeed. Schools in Kentucky also use these funds to finance work-study opportunities for participants.

Illinois, through the efforts of the non-profit organization Women Employed, in 2006 allocated \$3 million from general state revenue for the Disadvantaged Student Success Grants program. These resources provide additional funds to community colleges to address vital educational support services like counseling and tutoring. This action was partially motivated by a Women Employed report calling for the state to give priority attention to educational supports that help economically disadvantaged adults succeed in postsecondary education so that families can prosper and Illinois can build a stronger workforce.¹⁶

The federal Workforce Investment Act is another resource states can use to provide supports such as childcare and transportation for participants in intensive services or training. Typically, local workforce investment boards decide whether they wish to expend WIA funds for this purpose. State policymakers, however, have the authority to guide policy on this issue.

3) USE GENERAL INSTITUTIONAL FUNDING

A majority of states fund their local colleges through some type of formula, based on enrollments and projected needs and costs of various budget items such as instruction, financial assistance, student services, facility operations and other costs. Typically, the formula does not dictate or guide how resources should be spent by local institutions; each institution allocates the funds based on their perceived needs. One review of five states found that no state funding formula included specific or dedicated funding for counseling and guidance.¹⁷

States can ask three questions to determine if their approach to funding encourages institutions to improve their retention and completion rates:

- Are student services included in the institutions' funding formula?
- Is the formula/allocation for services commensurate with institution costs?
- Are the differences in student demographics and needs of each institution taken into account in determining funding?

Data suggests that lower-income, minority and first-generation students might require more assistance to improve their retention and completion outcomes. Colleges serving higher percentages of these students may warrant additional funds for student services. A key issue is how to encourage local postsecondary institutions to give priority to these issues. Certainly, institutions must be encouraged to allot more of their unrestricted funds toward supportive services. More importantly, some state funding formulas give little priority to supportive services and perhaps provide too much flexibility to local institutions in determining the level of resources allocated to student services. Finally, another issue is how the state funding formula values student services relative to other institutional activities.

States should reconsider their approach to financing colleges and universities to better support student success. According to Dennis Jones, Executive Director of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, one idea receiving increased attention is altering the financing formula to emphasize outcomes such as

course completions rather than enrollments.¹⁸ This trend should result in institutions giving more attention to how they support student academic success.

The **Washington** State Higher Education Coordinating Board articulated this as a goal in its 2004 Strategic Plan by expressing the need to “set clear and measurable goals that focus on outcomes rather than inputs alone.” The Plan further noted that “the current state funding system for higher education is based on enrollments (inputs) rather than recognizing positive achievements like student success (outcomes).” This led to a set of proposals to restructure the financing system for higher education, including community colleges. One notable proposal was to calculate enrollment levels at the time of course completion rather than on the 10th day of classes. Under this approach, student enrollment would be counted for state funding purposes only if students completed courses, not if they just enrolled in them. Another proposal was to base performance contracts on the achievement of demonstrable progress toward specific student outcomes.¹⁹

The Washington legislature has yet to adopt these proposals, although the Board continues to focus on them and advocate for change. The Board has adopted a set of student success outcomes for both the community college and technical system and the baccalaureate system. For the two-year system, outcomes include targets for improvement, which are set on a biennial basis. The Board will report on the outcomes and will require institutions to submit plans describing the strategies they will use to achieve measurable and specific improvements each academic year on both statewide and institution-specific performance measures.

4) REWARD SUCCESSFUL PERFORMANCE

Ohio is among a small number of states that have begun to use incentive funds to encourage local institutions toward productive changes in policy and programming. Ohio offers financial incentives to their four-year state universities for improved completion outcomes for resident undergraduates. The Success Challenge program is funded at \$52.6 million in FY 2007, and rewards universities for improving graduation rates for at-risk students and for accelerating degree completion times for all resident undergraduates. At the request of the General Assembly, the state

Board of Regents is examining the possibility of implementing a similar program for Ohio’s branch campuses, as well as its community and technical colleges. States that consider moving in this direction have to be careful that incentive structures account for differing characteristics of local institutions (*e.g.*, student demographics) and lead to the types of program improvements desired.

CONCLUSION

Many states lament the low skills of their workers. Community colleges are an important resource for workers and the gateway for many students who seek to increase their skills and their employability. But student success needs to become a priority for community colleges. By increasing student retention and completion rates community colleges can take a big step in assuring that workers are prepared for the demands of the future economy.

The Working Poor Families Project encourages the adoption of state policies that focus on student retention and completion outcomes and links such outcomes to enhanced student services and supports. To fully understand the state and institutional commitment to student services, WFPF state groups and others should carefully analyze current circumstances. This means answering several key questions such as: a) does the state through either targeted funding or its funding formula support student services; b) what is the level of support for student services across the state and at local institutions; c) do institutions with higher needs have additional resources available; d) are retention and completion outcomes measured and reported publicly; and e) are institutions held accountable as well as rewarded for their outcomes?

Recognizing that states and local educational institutions can and must do more to help students persist and complete credential and degree programs is a prerequisite for any specific policy actions. Unfortunately, as Women Employed notes in their report, “many policymakers view educational support services as peripheral programs or luxuries for flush economic times – a secondary concern in relationship to the primary costs of classroom instruction.”²⁰ This perception needs to change. By

focusing on the need to improve student retention and completion rates, particularly for non-traditional and disadvantaged students, policymakers can realize that investing in student services can lead to better outcomes for all students and, thus generate increased economic returns that benefit working families, communities and the local economy.

WORKING POOR FAMILIES PROJECT RECOMMENDATIONS:

State groups can consider making the following recommendations for stronger state policies:

- 1) Require postsecondary institutions to establish goals for raising student retention and completion rates, particularly for specific student populations such as working adults. This action requires colleges to have the capacity to track and report outcomes for all students, including retention, student transfer, and course and certificate completion. Outcomes reports should be used to identify and expand successful programs, services and course designs.
- 2) Fund colleges to encourage development and implementation of specific student service and support strategies. These strategies should lead to actions that build on successful program efforts such as those documented through the TRIO program, as well as other innovative efforts such as partnering with community-based organizations.²¹
- 3) Insure that institutional funding explicitly addresses student services needs, including academic support, guidance counseling and student supports. Funding should account for the varying demographics of student populations and needs at each institution. Institutions should be allowed to determine which educational services are appropriate for their students.
- 4) Offer postsecondary institutions incentives to increase student retention and completion outcomes. Require that incentives be used to further expand and enhance educational services and support programs.
- 5) Align other state policies such as TANF and WIA so that these program resources can be used to finance student supports. Such policies should apply statewide for eligible participants.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Key aspects of this Policy Brief are derived from a forthcoming Workforce Strategy Center report entitled “Working Together: Aligning State Systems and Policies for Individual and Regional Prosperity.” For the full report, which addresses additional state policy issues, go to: <http://www.workforcestrategy.org>.
- ² Thanks to Rachel Unruh of Women Employed and Frank Waterous of the Bell Policy Center for their helpful comments in preparing this piece.
- ³ Waldron, Roberts and Reamer. “Working Hard, Falling Short,” Working Poor Families Project, October 2004, p. ii.
- ⁴ Brock, Thomas and LeBlanc, *Promoting Student Success in Community College and Beyond: The Opening Doors Demonstration* (New York, NY: MDRC, May 2005).
- ⁵ *Measuring Up 2006: The National Report Card on Higher Education* (San Jose, CA: The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2006).
- ⁶ For a comprehensive and detailed review of specific services see: Purnell, Rog  air and Blank, Susan with Susan Scrivener and Reishma Seupersad, *Support Success Services That May Help Low-Income Students Succeed in Community College*, MDRC, New York, 2004.
- ⁷ For additional material on student services see: Tinto, Vicent, *Student Retention and Graduation: Facing the Truth, Living With the Consequences*, The Pell Institute for the Study of Opportunity in Higher Education. July 2004
- ⁸ Lotkowski, Robbins, and Noeth, *The Role of Academic and Non-Academic Factors in Improving College Retention*, ACT Policy Report, October 2004. p. vii
- ⁹ Brock and LeBlanc, May 2005 p. 33.
- ¹⁰ Tinto, p. 13.
- ¹¹ Brock and LeBlanc
- ¹² Pascarella, Ernest and Terenzini, cited by Kevin Dougherty, Monica Reid & H. Kenny Nienhuser in their paper *State Policies to Achieve the Dream in Five States: An Audit of State Policies to Aid Student Access to and Success in Community Colleges in the First Five Achieving the Dream States* (New York, NY: Community College Research Center, 2006) p. 13.
- ¹³ Brock and LeBlanc, May 2005 p. 10.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ To see the contract go to: <http://www.state.co.us/cche/performance/final/sbccoe.pdf>.
- ¹⁶ See: <http://www.womenemployed.org/docs/SupportServicesReport.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 14
- ¹⁸ Phone interview, May 1, 2006.
- ¹⁹ *2004 Strategic Master Plan for Higher Education* (Olympia, WA: Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, December 2004) p. 1.
- ²⁰ Women Employed p. 5.
- ²¹ See Roberts, Brandon, *The Best of Both: Community Colleges and Community-Based Organizations Partner to Better Serve Low-Income Workers and Employers*, Public/Private Venture, Philadelphia, January 2002.

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